

Families for Kids: A Powerful Approach to System Reform

THE FREEDOM TO PURSUE LOCALLY DEFINED METHODS WHILE SPEAKING A COMMON LANGUAGE OF DIRECTIONS AND VALUES ALLOWED FAMILIES FOR KIDS SITES TO MOVE MOUNTAINS. • IT IS RARE WHEN ANY LARGE UNDERTAKING TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE SUCCEEDS ON MANY DIFFERENT LEVELS—IMPROVING THE LIVES OF TENS OF THOUSANDS, CHANGING HEARTS AND MINDS, INFORMING NATIONAL POLICY, INFLUENCING A FIELD'S CORE PRACTICES, IMPROVING COLLABORATION, AND EMPOWERING NEW VOICES.

Families for Kids (FFK) is such a rarity, by most all accounts. Funded from 1993 to 2000 by the Kellogg Foundation, the \$38.5 million reform initiative sought to promote the timely placement of "waiting children" into loving, permanent homes. Permanency for children languishing in foster care who would not be returning to their biological families was the initiative's main focus.

As FFK was being conceived, national foster care statistics clearly pointed to a crisis, particularly for children of color, teens, sibling groups, and those with other special needs. Between 1982 and 1992, the number of children living in foster care had swelled from 262,000 to 442,000. By 1994, there

were approximately 500,000 children in foster care. Up to 100,000 of these children would not be returning to their biological families yet only about 19,000 annually were being placed in adoptive homes, and those few fortunate enough to be adopted were spending an average of between 3.5 to 5.5 years in "temporary care," often moving frequently from one foster home to another.

By 1999, child welfare systems in FFK's 11 implementation sites* had placed approximately 60,000 children into adoptive homes and guardianships. A substantial increase in placement rates and significant decreases in the time children spent in institutional care were also

achieved, according to "Families for Kids: Final Cluster Evaluation Report," prepared by Walter R. McDonald & Associates in 2000.

What lessons can FFK's approach offer for others pursuing system reform? Evaluators and project directors suggest that two features of FFK's underlying structure were especially important in driving successes.

First, the Foundation did not advance a particular model of service as the centerpiece of reform, though such "one-size-fits-all" strategies dominate the recent history of child welfare reform. Instead, after broad consultation, the Foundation ➤



Pictured after their adoptions are seven of the 60,000 kids placed in loving, permanent homes by Families for Kids implementation sites (1993–1999).



Lessons Learned

FFK's Common Language of Desired Directions and Values

One Vision: “A loving, *permanent* family for every waiting child.”

One Perspective: A commitment to “see reform through the eyes of a child.”

Six Outcomes (or “Practice Standards”) to Reshape Systems of Care:

- One year to permanency for each waiting child
- One stable foster care placement
- One family-friendly assessment
- One caseworker or casework team
- Comprehensive support for families
- Elimination of the current “backlog” of waiting children

A Set of Values Embraced by All Sites:

- Assume a fresh start is possible and shape new systems of care
- Practice diversity and community engagement
- Invest in people and building collaborative relationships
- Pursue a multitude of approaches simultaneously
- Expand the reach of known best practices

Frequent National Networking Meetings and “Summits” to

- Teach and build commitment to the “common language”
- Widen the circle of allies
- Help sites negotiate the challenges of system reform

► developed a vivid “common language” of directions and values to guide the entire initiative.

Second, the Foundation provided sites with the freedom and resources to develop their own programmatic methods to achieve shared aims. This balancing act between prescribed structure and freedom to innovate created fertile ground for both local experimentation and initiative-level accomplishments.

In the long run, the close fit that developed in many states between site innovations and community needs allowed strong local constituencies to form and help pave the way for new fiscal support after Foundation implementation grants ended.



A Common Language of Directions and Values

The overarching aim of the initiative was embodied in an exhortation as ambitious as it was memorable: “a loving, *permanent* family for every waiting child.” Putting the focus squarely on permanency, this vision suggested that all waiting children deserved and could be placed with “forever families.” To make the vision real, participants willingly committed to *see reform through the eyes of a child*, gauging every decision by its likely effect on waiting children. Systems themselves were to be reshaped by six new outcomes (or “practice standards”):

- one year to permanency
- one stable foster care placement
- one family-friendly assessment
- one caseworker or casework team
- comprehensive family support
- elimination of the current “backlog” of waiting children

An infrastructure of values rounded out the lexicon. The new language provided rallying cries as well as ideals to guide change. “We had never used these words before,” says Elizabeth Brandes, assistant director of the Catawba County Department of Social Service and a North Carolina FFK leader. “They became ‘mantras’ that were placed on bulletin boards and ‘chanted’. They determined best practices and promoted a philosophical shift in this agency that endures today.”

To judge system performance through the eyes of a child became a transforming personal vow for many project directors and their colleagues. Because of the clarity and emotional force of this and other elements of the common language, together with the Foundation's insistence on improved data tracking, many children and youth who had been "lost" in sites' foster care systems became visible, and their need for permanency became a single-minded priority for FFK staff. Barriers to permanency—such as system fragmentation and lack of coordination, lengthy placement delays due to court processing, cultural insensitivity to children and families of color, lack of staff training, and limited placement options—were attacked with new resolve and confidence.

The Freedom to Pursue Locally Defined Methods and Models

While the common language offered the broad outlines of change, sites were encouraged to experiment and innovate—to take full account of community needs, exploit opportunities as they arose, and respond to local constraints. "Freedom and flexibility were pervasive throughout the initiative," says Wendy Lewis Jackson, program director at the Grand Rapids Community Foundation and former Kent County, Michigan, FFK project director.

Site innovations fell into the six broad categories illustrated below.

1. Diversifying and Engaging Stakeholders

All sites were required to conduct "community ➤

Foster Care: Most Frequently Asked Questions

What is foster care?

"Foster care" is a general term describing children who are living away from their homes under the care of the state (supervised by child welfare agencies).

Who provides foster care?

Foster care is typically provided by a nonrelated family, a relative, a group home, or a residential facility. Almost half of all children living in foster care are staying with nonrelated foster families.

How many children are in foster care in the United States?

A total of 542,000 children were in foster care on September 30, 2001, when the most recent data were captured.

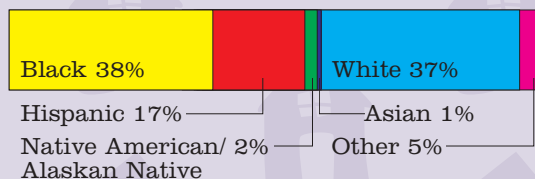
How old are these children?

Only four percent are under age one. Half are between the ages of one and 10, while the rest are age 11 or older.

What is their racial makeup?

Children of color make up nearly two-thirds of all children in foster care, though they constitute only a little more than one-third of the child population in the United States.

Percent in Foster Care



How long have these children been in foster care?

Though foster care is intended to be temporary, 44 percent have been there for more than two years, while 32 percent have been there more than three years.

What happens to these children?

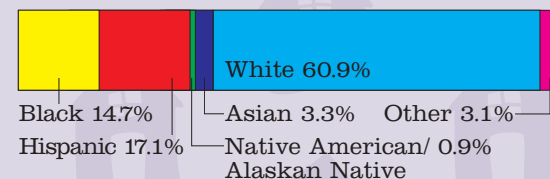
Of children leaving the system in 2001, 57 percent were reunited with their families, while 21 percent were placed in adoptive homes or guardianships in 2001. Of these placements, 50,000 were adoptions.

When is foster care problematic?

Studies have demonstrated that children with long stays in foster care—particularly those with multiple placements—are much less likely than children placed in permanent homes to finish high school, achieve job stability, and avoid destructive behaviors like premature pregnancy, trouble with the law, drug use, and repeating the cycle of abuse and neglect when they become parents.

For more general information, see www.davethomasfoundationforadoption.org.

Percent in Child Population



Sources: Foster care data was taken from "The AFCARS Report," Preliminary Estimates as of March 2003 (8); population statistics were drawn from "Census 2000."

► visioning" activities to engage a broad range of stakeholders in the process of shaping reform. While Foundation leaders constantly stressed the importance of diversity and community engagement, they refrained from providing a visioning "script"; instead, sites were encouraged to devise their own methods, and they responded by developing a wide range of different strategies: town meetings and forums, public hearings, interviews with target groups, scientific surveys, retreats for lawyers and judges, children's art shows, toll-free numbers, and media campaigns. Ultimately 14,000 stakeholders from 30 distinct groups registered their concerns and hopes for change—including many affected children and families who had never had a voice in reform.

2. Adapting Key Operational Terms

As reform efforts progressed, a high degree of consensus developed about the definitions of key operational terms. "Permanency," for example, came to stand for a multitude of different options that could ensure loving and legally secure families, yet not all sites embraced the same options. In states where populations of Native American waiting children were large, guardianship became an important—even indispensable—permanency option, because many tribes do not recognize the termination of parental rights and adoption as valid child placement practices. Because of differing demographics and cultural values, however, other sites, like Kent County, "had a difficult time establishing guardianship as a preferred option," says Jackson.

3–4. Addressing Outcomes and Developing Service Models

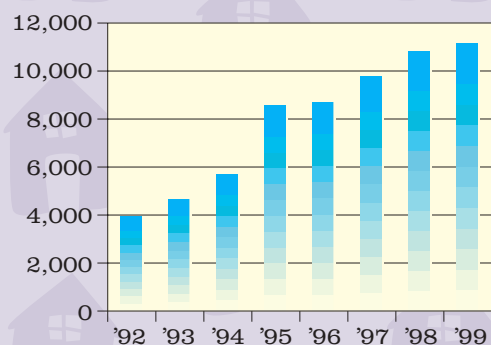
While sites as a group worked on all six outcomes, individual sites chose to address some outcomes but not others in their programs. These decisions reflected realistic assessments of community needs and local capacity.

"The number-one issue that came up in the visioning phase of Kent County FFK was that our community didn't feel that they had access to child welfare system decisionmaking," says Jackson. "We built a model to bridge that divide." Called the Kent County Family and Community Compact, the model utilizes conferences involving families and community members to help determine permanency options for

Major Achievements by Families for Kids

FFK Stimulated Large Increases in Adoptive and Guardianship Placements

Legally finalized adoptive and guardianship placements increased steadily, numbering approximately 60,000 across all sites by 1999.



Adapted from findings presented in "Families for Kids: Final Cluster Evaluation Report," Walter R. McDonald & Associates, Inc., June 2000. This report and a related report, "Through the Eyes of a Child: Lessons Learned by Project Directors of FFK," can be found on the Foundation's Web site at www.wkcf.org/YE under Publications and Resources.

Numbers to Notice:

- The annual number of adoptions and guardianships tripled from 3,800 to more than 11,000 between 1993 and 1999
- The permanency placement rate increased 17 percent (1993–1995)
- Permanency placement rates increased for Caucasian, African-American, Native American, and Asian children
- Permanency placement rates for children of all special needs groups and in all age categories under 18 increased
- The percentage of children adopted within one year after parental rights were terminated increased

Beyond the Numbers, FFK Sites ...

- Ultimately institutionalized and in some cases expanded selected innovations
- Diversified the stakeholders engaged in reform planning and system decisionmaking
- Informed new federal foster care and adoption policies
- Raised public awareness of the plight of waiting children locally and nationally
- Made data-driven decisionmaking a norm in site child welfare systems
- Established powerful collaborative relationships between child welfare agencies and the courts
- Demonstrated conclusively that it is possible to improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care

This image from an exhibit of children's art associated with South Carolina's Families for Kids shows how children in foster care yearn for permanent, loving families.



children. Though it addresses only three of FFK's outcomes, it has successfully responded to Kent County's greatest community needs: establishing community trust and engagement in the child welfare system and reducing by 20 percent the number of children of color coming into its care, says Jackson.

"Washington State FFK focused in areas where it was already strong and had special in-house expertise. To address the one-year-to-permanency and stable foster care placement outcomes, it developed a "prognostic staffing" model that has allowed staff to predict which children have a high likelihood of staying in foster care too long, so that permanency plans for them can be made early on," says Barb Fenster, the site's community relations director. This process initiates another intervention called "concurrent planning" that prevents delays in permanent placement by recruiting families

committed to working simultaneously to reunite children with their biological parents and to becoming adoptive families immediately if reunification fails.

In spite of the great diversity of models across all sites, there was unity of purpose because of FFK's common language. "We were all polishing the same gem, and the gem was permanence," says Marie Jamieson, director of Washington's FFK.

5. Using Data for System Management and Decisionmaking

Perhaps nothing changed child welfare practice more than the increased use of data. At the outset of the project most FFK sites—like child welfare systems across the country—had little useful data. FFK's intense evaluation methodology and the backlog reduction outcome played major roles in making data an indispensable aspect of practice. Still, use of data varied widely across sites. North Carolina FFK developed statewide performance measures tied to the FFK outcomes. Using research data to identify key problems for specific groups of waiting children, Washington State discovered and addressed the problem of infants staying too long in care. South Carolina and Kansas used data to educate the public about the number and characteristics of children needing families. Pima County created a model to track and hasten the movement of children toward permanency.

6. Institutionalizing Reforms

Sites also found different ways to institutionalize their innovations. The State of Kansas has now privatized most of its child welfare system services, integrating the FFK outcomes into service

contracts for contractors. North Carolina is integrating the outcomes into its public system statewide. In Washington and Massachusetts, cadres of FFK veterans based in private agencies offer system change assistance to colleagues within state systems and to policymakers.

These and other FFK legacies are not only maintaining and in some cases expanding models developed during the initiative's formative years, they are also sponsoring a new generation of system change initiatives inspired by the old but enduring common language.

"I really feel FFK is a useful prototype for other initiatives," says Lauren Frey, director, Massachusetts Families for Kids at Children Services of Roxbury, Inc. "It brought to the fore key Foundation values but allowed—and still allows—sites to craft system reforms most appropriate for them." ■

** FFK's 11 implementation sites: Pima County, Arizona; Kansas; Massachusetts; Kent County, Michigan; Mississippi; Montana; New York City, New York; North Carolina; Ohio; South Carolina; and Washington State*

